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The Negro Dialect

The Negro's Dialect. Double

The story has gone the rounds of the press that Paul Robeson, who himself tells us that he has toiled & spent to attain the accent not offensive to Mayfair, sometimes slips into the "soft slur of the Southern Negro" & even at the tragic moment of Othello's sublime fury demands: "Where am dat handkerchief, Desdemona?"

Reporters & critics must sell their stuff & one should not grudge them their little joke. Nothing helps like a bit of local color to heighten tone effects. This story listens well for heart interest on this side the Atlantic, where a black man is not true black unless he says "am dat." Mr. Robeson in his impersonation of the noble blackamoor may on his own part deliberately allow himself the racial touch, not at all inconsistent to my mind with a highly artistic effect. If he did so, be sure it was not a slip; he had been instructed & believed that such a departure would give just the original flavor he was expected to create! But speaking ex cathedra I claim, as one who ought to know, that no artist who has intelligently analysed the Negro folk-speech, whether he be poet, novelist, or impersonator, can ever accept "am dat" as a possibility in Negro or Southern vocalization.

It is universally conceded that racial groups attacking a foreign language with which they are forced to serve themselves, will invariably take the line of least resistance. Thus Franks, Burgundians, Goths & Visigoths uniformly clipped off the troublesome Roman terminations for declension & conjugation, points too fine to bother their matter of fact brains, & homo-hominis-homini-hominem lost everything but the essential tonic syllable or sound, which becomes for the Frenchman homme, for the Spaniard hombre, the Portuguese homem & to the Italian uomo — a new tongue slowly evolved by characteristic differentiation thro adjacent families or groups as the real expression of racial distinctions & peculiarities of vocalization that go to make a language. Later on comes that change within the family itself that we call provincialisms or dialects, either a natural growth from age to age or resultants from movement, differences in locality & climatic conditions, differences in occupation, habits, way of living, contacts with nature, contacts with other men.

Says Bourciez, Linguistique Romane:

"The stability of a language is wholly a relative matter. If a given language is spoken almost identically by men of the same generation & belonging to the same social group, one must see a priori that this language will necessarily undergo certain modifications on being transmitted from one generation to another.

& that the sounds of which the words are composed may be altered as well as the sense attributed to these words. This "evolution" is not only possible but in some sort inevitable. It is however more or less rapid according to historic conditions in the midst of which the people speaking a given language find themselves. If it is slow at certain epochs when a type of literary language taught in the schools predominates, there are other periods when change is accelerated, & when, with the dissolution of the ancient social ties, there appears a corresponding disorganization, even more prompt, of common idiomatic speech. One conceives equally that if a people, having formed at the beginning a vast empire speaking a language almost identical, happen to separate & to live d distinct political life, these people, no longer communicating with one another, experience each in their language particular alterations. It will be found then that at the end of a certain number of generations languages primitively identical, will be so no longer at the different points where it continues to be spoken, & the differentiation may have been so considerable, that one finds himself in the presence of several distind dialects."*

* Bourciez. "Elements de Linguistique Romane." Tr.

This is precisely what happened to the language of Shakespeare & Milton on American soil, & what, before automobiles & airplanes achieved their amazing annihilation of time & space, differentiated the strong burr of the West, the soft slur of the South, & the choppy staccato of the Northern United States, all of which differ from Mayfair English, not only in vocabulary & use of words, but even more in the placing of vocables, the muscular & I may say mechanical formation of sounds. Into the melting pot in due course was poured a witches mixture of races - Scotch, Irish, French, Italian, German, Swede, Negro, Pole, Slovak & what not, - all bound to make their wants known in this language of Shakespeare & Milton - the weaker less energetically than the strong, & some "with no language but a cry," but all murdering the King's English, each in his own way, modifications pivoting many times on slight differences in structure of vocal organs, or on environment, social contacts, etc. Doctor Frissell, General Armstrong's friend & successor at Hampton, used to remark: "Our boys," as he affectionately called them, "are rather venture-some with their English." Now undoubtedly to this racial or temperamental "venturesomeness" Negro folk have added their own characteristic physical equipment & endowments of organic structure

such as breadth of nostril, length of vocal chords & perhaps a certain peculiar resonance of chest tones that vary all the way from the rich bassoprofundo vibrations of "Andy" to the anaemic narrow chested headtones so well simulated by "Amos." But the dialect, like all attempts of beiwohners to serve themselves with a speech acquired exclusively by ear, never having started with the ABC at mother's knee, develops naturally by a process nothing different from the experiments of European Barbarians, who centuries ago attacked the Latin.

"Andy's" sitchation runs true to phonetic form, preserving the tonic syllable & all of the sound that is essential to carrying the sense (as any winged word should); the u never having been seen or consciously stressed is of course entirely negligible. The same analysis applies to "requsted" which has nothing whatever in common with the Irish "r.r" in its first syllable, being hardly more than the movable nu in Greek or the "eh-r-eh" so often heard in hesitating for a word - eh-r-eh gusted, that's the thing! the tonic syllable every time. "Propolition" is, if possible, even more characteristically fashioned according to racial instinct, since it directly seeks euphony in the exchange of the harsh sibilant "s" for the smooth liquid "l"; "propolition" is as accomodating & ready to please, or rather to avoid offense, as the

head waiter at a summer hotel. By the same reasoning "am dat", ascribed to Paul Robeson by the press & vouched for by Mr. Hannen Swaffer, must go. It is as artistically impossible to Robeson as it is untrue to nature in the primitive Negro who has never seen a book or been near a school house (or a stage prompter) — the simple reason being that the combination of a labial mute followed by a dental (m d) requiring that the lips close on m then open again to send tip of tongue behind upper teeth for d, is too difficult for his easy going lips to negotiate. His genius leans to flowing sounds, easy liaisons, more French than German, a prevalence of vowels, semi vowels, & liquids. He might say: "whea dat" or "wheah's dat," or even "whah dat hankycher" — but never, never, I pledge you my word, will you hear a Negro, not drilled into it for stage effect, utter of his own accord: "Where am dat handkerchief." It is simply impossible.

Much of the literary dialect such as "dis am", "he am", "him am", "ob dis" & "am dat" which our industrious press turns out by the scoop in its willingness to pander to popular taste for unsophisticated & "colorful" native speech, would fall flat if held up thus to Nature's mirror

insert p. 7 "I"

No child says It is I,
right off the bat. He seems
to shy at "I am" with per-
sisting disapproval
meeting your well meant
attempts with cunningly
devised substitutes such
as "Johnny is" & "me is"
till sometimes his wrath
gets the better of his manners
& he downs his tormentor
with "Aw-Me said Ahee!"

to be tried by the rules of organic growth. It is a principle of grammar recognized in children as well as in adult beginners, that irregularities are accepted last & that in verbs the third singular is made to serve for irregular first & second. The child speaks of "both feets," says "I drinked" "he hitted me," "mine is goodest," learning rules before exceptions, & "I is" (when corrected often gets it "I are") never "he am". In fact I think you will find the form am is rather late coming into play, having to be stressed & directed quite a bit before it stands without hitching, with its own proper subject. "Mary's gwine", for instance is folk made & "dat's" for "dat is"; but "dat am" does not bear the hall mark.

The difficult th sound in this & that, the Negro, like the Frenchman, systematically reduces to d; "dis" & "dat" are his own peculiar contribution. But not all Southern deviations from standard English can be set down as Negro in origin. "Ole Virginny" for instance is heard just as frequently among uneducated whites of that locality as among uneducated blacks. The Negro simply speaks the language of his locale, gives back his version of what he hears.

I once had a domestic who was absolutely illiterate, could not write her own name

or recognize it when she saw it & yet her language was beautifully English - not Yankee but English. Aunt Charlotte came to us quite casually thro an employment agency, but I found her such an interesting character, so original, so genteel & withal so lovable, that I kept her long after she was too old to serve my household needs. She used to say: "My white folks would'nt allow their servants (she never said slaves) to 'sociate wit de poorer clahses. Said hit would teach bad habits." Pronounced "gyerl" & "gyahd'n" with that peculiar soft purling sound that only those to the manor born can hope ever to approximate even after patient painstaking practice. An implacable aristocrat, Aunt Charlotte would let you know when she had finished berating some "low down human" as "the scum o' de yearth" that "jum de time she was six years ole 'clean twell she growed up" she slept on a cot in the room with her young mistress of the same age & was always taught "to carry myself 'cordin to who I am & who I be."

Much of the Negro talk that has burst into the picture since the apotheosis of the "Type" in post War literature is machine made & crassly overdone under the usual pressure of Mass production.

For the fact is there is no such thing as Negro dialect per se just as there was never such a thing as a unique Negro or African language, understood & spoken ab origine by all dwellers on the continent of Africa whose descendants were kidnapped for slavery. Says DuBois: "The slave raiding drew upon every part of Africa - upon the West Coast, the western & Egyptian Sudan, the valley of the Congo, Abyssinia, the Lake regions, the East Coast & Madagascar - Bantus, Mandingoes, Songhays, the Nubian & Nile Negroes, the Fula & even the Asiatic Malay were represented in the raids." A tribal group then, even if they could chance to preserve their identity thro the decimating welter of the Middle Passage had no possibility whatever of solidarity amid the winnowing vicissitudes of the auction block, hence one might even more properly seek for a "European" than for an African "dialect." The Gullah talk of those slaves segregated on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina was as unintelligible to the aristocratic colored servants of French Huguenots in Charleston as to their equally aristocratic owners; while in comparing Virginia & Texas with reference to those who really have nothing in common but their color, the differences in tone, idioms & fundamental root-

words are so radical & conspicuous as to suggest that they are not racial at all, but traceable possibly to climate, environment & general habitat. It is more correct to speak of an Ohio brogue, or a Georgia drawl than of a "Negro" dialect; & yet it may be conceded that the lip laziness ascribed by phoneticians to Americans in general is naturally & temperamentally exaggerated perhaps among persons of heavier maxillae & weak orbicularis oris, until developed by the gymnastics of energetic exercise, such as the French give in "Jantot le rat tata & riz" etc. Again, it may be that the circumstances & conditions that gave rise to the bon mot: "Keep a stiff upper lip" & "Dont let on" can be held accountable in part at least for a complex that has resulted in greater immobility of those muscles that control speech organs, so noticeable here in comparison with natives of France & England. For after all the English, or attempt at English, of the American Negro is purely an American product & may be traced in each elemental characteristic to its roots in American life. Many of its syncopes & elisions are as old as Chaucer or the King James Version of the Bible. e.g. "afeard" for afraid; holpen or holp for helped (pronounced without the l); "hit" for it, "til" for to: "Is lyknèd til a fish that is waterless," Chaucer. "Moot" for must or might:

"Men moot yeve silver to the povre freres" Chaucer
"Hit mought 'a' den agin hit moughtn't" Negro.
The common demonstrative "dis here" has its prototype as far back as the classic Latin, hic-haec-hoc, formed of the blending of an older demonstrative with "ce", advert of place, written as late as Cicero enclitic on certain case forms like hosce, hisce, huiusce, the ce meaning "here". The accusative hunce & hance of course could not be pronounced. Accordingly we have hunc & hanc, but the union is evidently "this + here" as "this here man." Again "swich or sich" for such & "forto"

"For to delen with no swich poraille" Chaucer.
"What went ye out for to see?" Bible.
"Comin' for to carry me home" Folk Hymn.

On the other hand the conscious eye-minded "improvements" made in folk speech to render it up to date & grammatical are as undeniably racial as any dialect so labeled. The change made by present day culture in the beautiful Spiritual

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
"Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble"

grammatical but not nearly so close to the heart of the people as the folk version:

"Oh-h-h Sometimes it makes-eh-me tremble, tremble
"Were you there when they nailed Him to the Cross.

I heard Paul Robeson sing Water Boy & I have not yet made up my mind whether it was the real Robeson

I heard or the actor impersonating a shuffling, sprawling, crap shooting, chain gang Negro. True the perfection of art is to conceal art & if Mr. Robeson, the impersonator, does perfectly the type he chooses to present, the only criticism that can attach to him is for choosing one type & not another. One feels differently about Roland Hayes; when he sings Negro words he seems to interpret, not a race, but music, & that speaks a universal language, - a human language that all souls understand.

Green Pastures in the opinion of the writer falls just short of being great for this very reason of over-specialization. As a portraiture of naive & elemental folk-reaction to a group of Bible Stories reflected thro the prism of the untutored imaginations of a primitive & essentially religious people it had the chance of being an immortal epic scintillating with all the hues of their rich & vivid temperament. But, notwithstanding all the stage accessories & wealth procurable thro the modern theater this elaborate study would peter out as a cheap & rather bizarre melodrama were it not saved by the sincere artistry of Richard B. Harrison & the really good & true singing of their undying spirituals by a chorus that knows, feels & loves them. The author with his fish fry & bone in cherubic throats has labored to bring forth a pourrire for an audience

already committed to the judgment that whatever is done by Negroes must be ludicrous, sincere self expression being out of the question. Such a judgment is the result of a myopic habit of studying behavior only, & concluding egocentrically that all behavior is "put on" for effect on the observer. I have no quarrel with the author's empyrean menu — fried fish or even pigs feet would suit me quite as well as milk & honey — but it is lugged in adventitiously, with malice prepense, & does not at all grow from the roots of this people, having no place whatever in the racial or human imagination.

Mr. Harrison presents artistically the kindly indulgent patriarch that adequately embodies the anthropomorphism of his people. All races gifted with any imagination at all represent their deities in terms of their own qualities actual or hoped for. Michael Angelo's "God the Father" done in figments for the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel is no more ethereal or spiritually satisfying than Harrison's done in the impersonality & tones of a living man, & the heart weary cry with which he utters: "I'm tired of this people's disobedience & crooked doings" comes as close to shaming us wayward moderns into the conviction of a guilty conscience as the literal translation in Genesis of the Hebrew: "& the Lord God repented that He had made man."

The author achieves a touch of genuine Negro humor when he makes the bibulous Noah plead with the Almighty to grant "jes one mo kag o' likker for the

forty days cantonment in the ark; he is not so happy on the other hand when he puts undignified words in the mouth of "the Lord"; however common such words may be in the supposed Negro lingo. "Doggone it" strikes home with ease in the character of "Amos"; but no Negro would ever imagine the Lord using that expression. For the folk mind of the Negro is essentially reverent even when it seems grotesque to the ununderstanding mind of a foreign or unsympathetic genius. He takes his religion seriously & never spontaneously creates a burlesque on things & thots that he holds sacred.

Turning to the "Amos n' Andy" creations, one is puzzled to find the secret of their tremendous vogue & irresistible appeal for all classes & all ages. Opinions differ. Some ascribe their popularity to the consummate skill with which the actors put over the Negro's dialect. Some claim it is their clever imitation of the tones, so characteristically racial. Some hurriedly turn off the radio & resent the skit *in toto* as injurious to the taxicab industry. Apprehension is expressed by others that for American youth the "well of English" is no longer undefiled & the sheer popularity of these consummate impersonators of Negro humor actually threatens the language of Shakespeare & Milton. As a matter of course we appreciate an artist & esteem him great just so far as he succeeds in holding a glass to Nature to interpret for the less gifted thro the medium mastered by his own skill, her

myriad moods, her cryptic meanings, her "various language". He becomes eyes to the blind, ears for the deaf, & sympathetic insight for those callonsed with prejudice. Messrs. Gosden & Correll have the gift or have caught the trick of human insight, of seeing & painting rock bottom essentials, so that in spite of superficial differences, the picture remains human, acts, speaks & reacts with that touch of Nature that makes all kin. The worries & anxieties of little "Amos" (you image him both little & threadbare) over his "Hundud an' twenty fi' dollahs" interest & amuse a nation of millionaires just as Gulliver's Lilliputians perennially interest & amuse men of normal stature because they see that the little fellows after all are human. It is like looking at your reflection in the concave side of the mirror — you see your own foibles & follies, but on a scale so unheard of, so unsuspected & withal so amusing that you get a thrill from the very freshness & novelty of your own face. In sympathetic good humor you laugh at the good natured caricature, "This Amos is a likable guy after all - & what a conceited ass is Andy! Oh well-a-day - Should'nt wonder if there's a bit of the same thing in all of us!" The miracle is that you have had revealed thro the soft slur of the Southern Negro" & those resonant tones the Soul of a Folk you had never seen before at closer focus than the outer rim of some epidermic cells - the same miracle that the creative artist must unfailingly bring to pass, whatever his tools & whoever his public. Whether he work with pigments or

chisel, with tone pictures or muscular action, he must reveal to you, whoever you are, a human kinship, the great human fact, whatever his race & whatever his theme. DuBose Heywood can thus paint Porgy of Catfish Alley & Mamba's Daughters, not because of any personal photography from experience with "Types" in those environs, still less because of any sermon or theorem he has to promulgate, but because he has the genius to look into that human ant hill down deep enough & sincerely enough to find that "~~Out of the mud & scum of things~~ There always, always ~~something sings~~. ~~& that~~ Fate under the hood of environing conditions is the inexorable protagonist of Man in Life's Drama whether the hero be Oedipus, or Jean Valjean, Porgy or Othello. In the last analysis: The Play's the thing" - not the Dialect & not the race of the Players.

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